

Romans : Conforming

Sunday 26th July 2020

Readings: Psalm 128, Genesis 29:15-28, Matthew 13:31-33,44-52, Romans 8:26-39

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Have you ever seen sheepdog trials on TV or live? A shepherd and one dog have the task of herding a group of three sheep into a small 2.4 x 2.4 metre enclosure. Believe me, .4 x 2.4 is actually a very small area in the middle of a paddock. The sheep are usually not very good at getting the message which makes it all the more fun to watch, but not so much if you are the shepherd or the dog. Even less so when you have one or more truly petulant, headstrong sheep who do not like to be herded in a given direction. Jesus and the Bible frequently use rural imagery and that of the Good Shepherd and sheep, more as a reflection of God's loving character than as a description of humanity but there are times ... One of the outcomes of Christian discipleship and Christian self-discipline is that we are constantly conforming and being conformed into Christ-likeness. This doesn't mean that we are becoming clones and more than God creating humanity in His image in Genesis makes us all little clones, alike in everything. We each have individual personalities, strengths, weaknesses, experiences, gifts and talents. God gives us the opportunity to shape our moral and ethical character and our will to align with His. We don't want to become random sheep, ever getting into strife and chaos, rather we want to become followers of the Good Shepherd travelling along with our brothers and sisters enjoying the journey. But how to conform our will when we are naturally so rebellious, stubborn, proud and even entitled?

It is not only us waiting on this process to happen in our lives. Last week we considered how the Created Order is waiting for God's children to be revealed and for us to begin the work that God will complete at the end of time. In today's passage from the apostle Paul's epistle to the Romans we see how this is possible ... not by our own strength but by God's. Not ignoring the state of the world but in full recognition of it.

When we consider the state of the world, or the challenges of our family or community, or even some of our personal challenges we know our own weaknesses, those areas of life in which we lack wisdom, understanding, skills, time, even emotional strength or capacity. Sometimes we don't even have the words or energy to pray. God understands this totally. Paul states when this happens the **"Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans."** It is an interesting phrase. The Holy Spirit groaning on our behalf? Actually, the language here is really interesting. The Holy Spirit helps us, not just on these occasions but continually, understanding that weakness is part of our nature. The terminology used of this "help" is of one person assisting another with a heavy load. God knows the weight of the burdens we carry. Furthermore, our inability to pray is of itself a weakness; a sign we are yet to completely have our faith in the Lord and that the time of fulfilment has not yet come. Like the Creation, earlier in the chapter, we can groan in our spirit at the condition of the world and life. Fortunately, God does not want us to remain in this situation. The Spirit intercedes for us, prays for us, in accordance with the will of God. This is the very best prayer. When we pray we pray in Jesus' Name. In essence, this means that we pray as if we were Jesus making the prayer. I know, it's not always that easy is it? Our motives are not always that pure or our self-interest put aside. But when we are at the limit of what we can do the Spirit steps in even more directly to pray on our behalf. The Holy Spirit is ideally suited to do this because we are told in Old and New Testaments (1 Sam. 16:7; Heb. 4:13) that the Holy Spirit searches our hearts, He knows us that intimately. Then He intercedes for us. The term used here in Greek is only used in this one place in the New Testament – it speaks of an approach to the very throne of God on our behalf ... and in line with God's will. How cool is that! Just as we love the image of the "Footprints", as we are reminded Jesus walk with us, even carries us, in times of great stress, alongside this we can picture the Holy Spirit speaking to God for us.

Another issue that believers can have in their walk, especially in times of stress and trouble is wondering if they are really saved. When we are pressured it is easy to focus on our

weaknesses and failures, our shortcomings and sin. But it is not the plan of God for us to have an undue focus on such things or to doubt our salvation. So, following his discourse on the Holy Spirit's intercession for us in times of stress, the apostle Paul addresses this issue as well because he knows the two are often linked.

Firstly, we are reminded that it is God who is in charge. That it is God who, as Paul states in Philippians 1:6, **“began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”**. God is working out His plan in the world and we are blessed to be a part of it.

Romans 8:28 then comes as one of the most powerful and critical verses in all of the Scriptures. Stating that, **“and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”** the apostle makes the most profound assertion. God is working good for those who love Him in **ALL THINGS**. Now that takes some pondering. How do we understand this? Sometimes, when life gets rough and unfair things seem to happen, it certainly doesn't feel like that. What Paul speaks of here is firstly the process of **sanctification**. “Sanctification” is the Christian term for the way God transforms a believer's whole being, mind, will, behaviour, and passions through the work of the Holy Spirit. Not only is the Holy Spirit speaking to God on our behalf He is God's agent at work in our lives bringing all things into appropriate focus. In every experience of life, we are encouraged to see it as if we are looking through Jesus' eyes. What is the purpose in the situation? What can we learn from it? How could we do things differently? How will it shape how we face the future? What can we give thanks to God for? What can we be grateful for that we may have taken for granted? What more do we need to learn? Through life's experience the Holy Spirit shapes us if we allow it to happen. And note this is through ALL THINGS – the good and the bad.

Secondly, the **big picture** is always to be kept in mind. Life happens to those who have been called according to God's purpose. God has an ultimate purpose in mind that will be achieved. This is not a possibility it is a reality. As Jesus' resurrection was promised and became a reality, so too the end of all things will be according to God's plan. This gives us great assurance even when we don't see what we would like to happen in our timeframe.

And thirdly, over all of this, is the promise that **God will work everything out for good**. I think that is something that we have to initially take on faith and then celebrate it in those times when we see it happen. Sometimes it is very hard to see the good in situations. Glib assurances of this in the midst of crisis are not helpful. The words of the Paul McCartney song “Yesterday” can seem so true ... *“Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away, now it looks as though they're here to stay”*. However, as one grows in faith it is possible to look back over life and see how God has used some of the worst situations in your life to shape you. Because of these experiences you may even be of help to others. Some of you will have experienced this. Just because we cannot see the result in the midst of crisis doesn't mean the ultimate outcome will be bad, in fact, we are assured it will be good.

God's purpose is for us to be **“conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters”**. Paul tells us that **“those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified.”** How do we unpack this?

There has been a long-running debate over what “predestined” means in this context which we will not get into now. A working understanding tells us that because God knows the outcome, not being limited by time, our actions are pre-determined. This doesn't mean our choices are pre-ordained, simply known. God knows His own, the shepherd knows His sheep and they respond to His voice. God's work with us can be seen in three stages: call, justification and glorification. God calls and His people respond – each individually. When we respond to His call God justifies us. Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient for us and takes the penalty of our sin from us. Just as if we had never sinned. Because of this and the work of sanctification in our lives, God will ultimately also glorify us – take us to Himself. This is outlined so that the

Christian can have confidence. We are on a journey and all at different places on that journey but God is actively at work in our lives every day. We are His work.

Being conformed to the will of God may at times seem like you need the perseverance of Jacob. In our reading from Genesis poor Jacob worked seven years for the hand of his beloved Rachel only to be married to Leah and then having to work another seven years for Rachel. No doubt Jacob wasn't too happy about this and it is doubtful this was God's ideal situation but rather Laban's scheming. In some ways it was a lesson about deceit as Jacob had earlier deceived his own father and brother Esau. Irrespective, God used the situation to prepare Jacob for the future and to become the father of many children, sons and daughters. It was the love that Jacob had for Rachel that carried him through his hard times and love is so often the key.

The final passage of Romans 8 assures us that God's love for us is greater than any situation we can or could face in this world, physical or spiritual. This should be of great encouragement to us and something to hold on to throughout life. Jesus is continuing His work. He too is interceding for us and continues to pour out His love for us. The shepherd loving and caring for His sheep. This powerful love is the culmination of God's affirmation of our faith and our assurance of our salvation. The sheep follow His voice willingly because they know, experience and trust in His love. It is no wonder the end of Romans 8 is one of the most well-known and used passages of the Scriptures. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. As we conform our lives to God's will we know this with an ever-growing certainty through all of life. May it be so for you.

Amen